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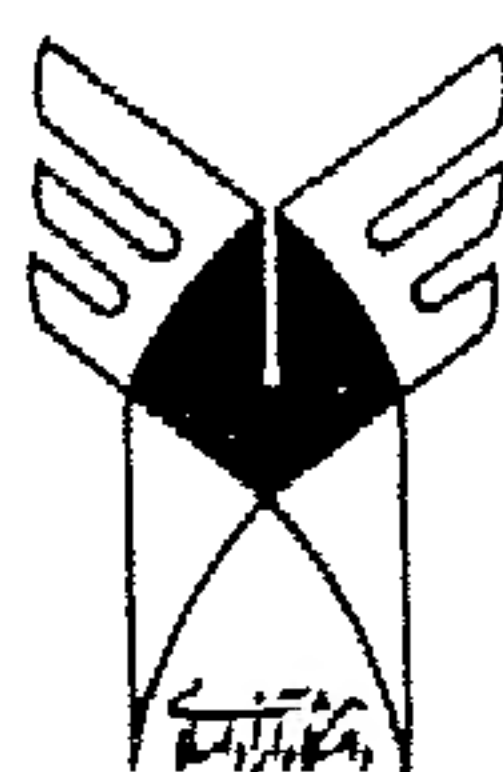
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In The Name of God



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Department of Archaeology, Islamic Azad University of Abhar, Abhar, Iran

P.O.Box:22

E-Mail: Archaeology@iau-abhar.ac.ir

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The Median Empire in Iran and the Fall of Assyria

Robert S. Wójcikowski
Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, Poland

The land of Media, located within the area of north-west Iran, had been regularly invaded by Assyrians since the 9th century BC, yet it never became part of their empire.¹ This region in the Zagros Mountains was a diverse ethnic and political mosaic. The Assyrian chronicles noted that apart from the Indo-European Medes from the region of Iran, the land was also inhabited by the peoples of Mana, Kashshu, and Lullubi. They formed separate small countries, located between Assyria and Urartu. These people, on one hand, had always put up a stiff resistance to Assyrian invasions, yet on the other hand they had also sought Assyrians' help in settling their local conflicts.² However, for a long time they were unable to form an independent political body capable of balancing the Assyrian power. The constant Assyrian surge hastened the process of consolidation of the Median people. Still, the details of this process, due to the lack of written sources, remain unknown.³ It was after 625 BC that Media was regarded as one of the major powers in the Middle East.⁴

During the Esarhaddon's rule (680-669), Assyrians prevented the nomadic Cimmerians⁵ from crossing the Assyrian border. They were unable, however, to break the wave of another nomadic group – Iranian Scythians⁶, who established their rule over Medes.⁷ Concerning Median tribes, Scythians were one of Assyria's allies and a part of its policy regarding Western Iran.⁸

In about 625 BC, the Median king Cyaxares drove Scythians out of his country.⁹ His victory opened a new chapter in the history of the Middle East. Shortly after that event, Medes together with Babylonian Chaldeans, who rebelled against Assyria, overthrew the Assyrian rule over Middle-Eastern countries and erased this once powerful empire from the political map of that time. The Assyrian Empire, spreading terror among its neighbours for centuries, had a very sudden fall. The Assyrian military power, being the

¹ Collins, 1974, 12; Diakonov, 1985, 77-79; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 45; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006; Johannès, 2007, 23, 27-30, 31, 33.

² Collins, 1974, 12; Diakonov, 1985, 36; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 46-47, 49; Radner, 2003, 59-60; Edzard, 2004, 198; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006.

³ Radner, 2003, 39, 62.

⁴ Zawadzki, 1996, 11.

⁵ Pietraszewski, 1924, 20; Godard, 1962, 101; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 50-51; Drews, 2004, 111.

⁶ Diakonov, 1961, 50; Diakonov, Cyaxares; Frye, 1965, 71-71; Frye, 1984, 70; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 50-51; Dandamayev, Grantovskii Assyria; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya 2006; Edzard, 2004, 222.

⁷ Hdt I, 103-104.

⁸ Diakonov, 1961, 50; Frye, 1984, 71

⁹ Hdt I, 106. The date of the Median victory can be obtained from Herodot's evidence and his chronological schemes.

basis of the country's supremacy, was unable to stop the joined forces of the Median-Babylonian coalition.

After the death of Ashurbanipal (669-626), whose rule had brought Assyria to the peak of its power, the serious crisis engulfed the whole empire. The country's destabilization was connected with the unsettled issues regarding succession to the throne, as well as with bad economic situation which led to chaos.¹⁰ The Chaldean governor of Babylonia – Nabopolassar, took advantage of this situation and in 627/626 BC, he rebelled against the Assyrian monarch – Sinsharishkun. In order to consolidate his position, Nabopolassar proclaimed himself a king and, taking advantage of the Assyrian weakness, moved north to liberate Babylonia.¹¹ Other countries in the region also participated in this conflict. In about 616 BC, Egypt joined the war to fight on Assyrian side.¹² Also the allies of Nineveh from the north-western Iran – Manneans, were fighting against Babylonians, but they perished very quickly. In 616, Chaldeans took over Babylon, liberated the whole country and occupied the two southern provinces of Assyria – Hindanu and Suchu. However, after the unsuccessful attempt to occupy Nineveh, the Babylonians offensive collapsed, and in 615, Assyrians struck back, pushing Nabopolassar's army further south.

These events vividly showed the weakness of Babylonian forces. Although the Chaldeans, due to the fierce defense, managed to stop the advancing Assyrian army at the point of Tikratin fortress, their own offensive collapsed. Nabopolassar's rebellion appeared to be a foregone conclusion. The situation changed in the autumn of 615, when the Babylonia's allies – Medes - appeared at the Assyrian border.

Their coming completely changed the outcome of this campaign. In 614 BC, Medes attempted the siege of Nineveh, but again, the fierce defense and powerful fortifications made them move back from the city walls. Their next objective was the old capital of Assyria – Ashur. The city was captured and razed to the ground. In 612 BC Medes once again attempted to destroy Nineveh, and this time the siege was successful. The city fell, and the Assyrian ruler Sinsharishkun died.¹³

The war did not end with the capture and destruction of the main Assyrian cities. The victory was not complete and, what is more, the Assyrian army was still strong. After the fall of Nineveh, there was a two-year break in military activities. It allowed Assyrians to rebuild their forces and regroup their troops. The fighting resumed in 610 BC, and this time it were the Assyrians, led by Ashur-uballit II (612-608), who took the initiative and defeated Babylonians at Harran. This victory, however, did not change the outcome of the war. Shortly after the Harran battle, Ashur-uballit II was defeated by Medes at the very same place.¹⁴

The closing chapter of this war consisted of a series of battles between Medes and Urartians – the old enemies of Assyria, who wanted to take advantage of the situation and regain their power. Once again Media was victorious. Since 607, there had been

¹⁰ Zawadzki, 1996, 11; Joannès, 2007, 32-33.

¹¹ Pietraszewski, 1924, 42; Diakonov, 1961, 54; Godard, 1962, 103-104; Frye, 1984, 75; Zawadzki, 1996, 11; Joannès, 2007, 33, 85.

¹² Zawadzki, 1996 23-24.

¹³ Nah. 3, 7; Collins, 1974, 18; Diakonoff, 1985, 122-123; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 57.

¹⁴ Pietraszewski, 1924, 45-61; Godard, 1962, 104; Frye, 1965, 73; Frye, 1984, 73; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 57; Dandamayev, Grantovskii, Assyria; Liverani, 2003, 12; Raede, 2003, 151-152; Rollinger, 2003, 291-292; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006; Diakonow, Cyaxares; Joannès, 2007, 33-34, 85.

numerous military engagements between Babylonia and Egypt, concluding in the battle of Carchemish (605 BC). Babylonians defeated Egyptians along with the remainder of the Assyrian troops fighting by their side.¹⁵ This Babylonian victory sealed the new balance of power in the region¹⁶, and the Assyrian land was divided between the victors.¹⁷ Sources are not certain what land went under direct Median rule. The Akkadian chronicles do not confirm explicitly the Median rule over northern Mesopotamia, what was considered a certainty in the scholarship.¹⁸ The biblical sources are equally enigmatic. The prophet Jeremiah writes about Medes – the kings of the north, but he does not precisely describe the territories under their rule.¹⁹

This general overview of the Assyrian collapse indicates that it were Medes who were the major force in the conflict. It is contradicted, however, by some Babylonian sources, which tend to diminish the Median role and describe the Chaldeans as the main force in the Babylonian-Median alliance. In the Chronicle of Nabopolassar (also called the Gadd Chronicle), as well as on the Cylinder of Nabonidus from Sippar, Medes are referred to as Ummān-manda.²⁰ It was a pejorative term used to describe various less-civilized peoples, mostly nomads, known to the inhabitants of Mesopotamia. There is no doubt that in case of these two texts the term was a reference to Medes. This description had some overtones of propaganda, presenting the Babylonian allies as barbaric tribes.²¹

The aim of Nabopolassar was simple – to liberate Babylonia from the Assyrian rule. Earlier there had been some attempts to achieve this aim, but each had ended with the Assyrian victory. For Medes, after they drove away Scythians, Assyrians did not present a real threat. Assyrians were too busy maintaining order at their southern and western border. From the 670s, the Assyrians tried to establish their control over Egypt. Ashurbanipal was able to suppress a Babylonian revolt (652-648) and to destroy Susiana. But after his death the empire lost Egypt, and Babylonia started its rebellion led by Nabopolassar. In this situation, there was no possibility of Assyrian attack on northwestern Iran, especially that the bulk of the Medes had never been under a direct Assyrian rule.

As can be seen, the alliance with Medes was much more beneficial for Chaldeans, as they had to secure the recently liberated Babylonia. In 610 BC, during the second stage of the war, the weakened forces of Assyria fought for survival. However, they were strong enough to beat Babylonians at Harran. Even at this stage of the war, the Babylonian forces were unable to oppose Assyrians on their own. Thus they needed the Median intervention.

The battle of Harran vividly showed the Babylonian weaknesses and the military advantage of Medes. The idea of carrying out a long-term campaign in order to exhaust

¹⁵ 2 King 23, 29-30, Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 59; Zawadzki, 1996, 25-26.

¹⁶ Pietraszewski, 1924, 61-68; Diakonov, 1961, 54-55; Godard, 1962, 104; Diakonoff, 1985, 123-125; Zawadzki, 1996, 23-25; Curtis, 2003, 158-159; Raede, 2003, 151-152, 155; Rollinger, 2003, 290-295, 297.

¹⁷ Diakonov, 1961, 55; Frye, 1984, 76; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 58; Zawadzki, 1996, 25-26.

¹⁸ Tuplin, 2004, 234.

¹⁹ Jeremiah 51. 25, 27-28.

²⁰ Pietraszewski, 1924, 53-55; Diakonow, 1961, 55; Frye, 1965, 69; Zawadzki, 1988, 66-67; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 55-56; Dandamayev, Grantovskii, Assyria; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006.

²¹ Zawadzki, 1988, 120, 128-131; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 55-56.

the enemy contradicted the lack of political experience of Medes. What is more, the military actions of Medes so far from their border, at the same time securing the core of the country (including the eastern border), proved how powerful they were.

In his *Histories*, Herodotus writes about the military reforms carried out by the Median king Cyaxares. Reportedly, this ruler, as one of the first in Asia, divided the army according to the weaponry wielded by soldiers, thus creating groups of lancers, archers and horsemen. Each of these groups had its separate place in the battle formation. Before his rule, all of them reportedly had been fighting together as one group.²² I. M. Diakonoff rightly suggested that Herodotus' account depicts the starting point of creating regular armies in place of tribal contingents.²³ This Median war machine created by Cyaxares proved to be a useful and powerful tool in the hands of such a sophisticated politician. The Median army proved its effectiveness in battles with Scythians, and later with Assyrians.

Throughout its history, Assyria often had to fight against enemy coalitions. Apart from the perfect army the Assyrians had an advantage of incoherence in their enemies' ranks. The hastily formed anti-Assyrian alliances were impermanent and were quickly breaking up due to the inner ambitions. It made it easier for Assyrians to rule over those countries.

The Median-Babylonian alliance, however, proved to be remarkably stable. Medians were loyal allies throughout the time of the war. That was probably due to a strong ruling centre in Media, overseeing the course of the conflict. After the capture of Nineveh in 612 BC, Assyrians lost their power. The renewal of the Babylonian-Median alliance after the fall of Assyrian capital showed that these two allies had not only military, but also political aims in common. One of these aims was the ultimate destruction of Assyria and partition of its land between Media and Babylonia.

The marriage of Nebuchadnezzar, son of Nabopolassar, to Amytis, daughter of Cyaxares, tightened the relations between both empires.²⁴ Babylonians must have been well aware of the Median king's power. After the fall of Assyria, it was Media which became the most powerful force in the region. Babylonians were trying to have the best relations with such a strong country in order to secure their lands in the future. This situation shows that Cyaxares was not just a plain chief of nomadic hordes, as claimed by some of the contemporary scholars.²⁵ The Median king proved to be a prudent politician, capable of devising a broad political plan, which would establish Media as a dominant country in the region. The union through marriage with the ruling house of Babylonia illustrated his aspirations and strong position.

The concept of Media as a centralized political body during Cyaxares' rule remains controversial in the scholarship.²⁶ The earlier history of Medians is fragmentarily sketched by the Assyrian sources. These sources present Media as a land divided into

²² Hdt I 103.

²³ Frye, 1984, 75.

²⁴ Pietraszewski, 1924, 43; Frye, 1984, 81; Dandamayev, Lukonin, 1989, 55; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006;.

²⁵ Henkelman, 2003, 197; Lanfranchi, 2003, 79; R. Rollinger, 2003, 290.

²⁶ Henkelman, 2003, 197; Lanfranchi, 2003, 79; M. Liverani, 2003, 7-8, 11; Radner, 2003, 37-38; R. Rollinger, 2003, 290, 318-319.

several small and weak countries.²⁷ It was only during Cyaxares' rule that the Medians are an established political and military power. It seems to prove that there had been some sort of a tendency among Median people to create a unified country, but this development was suppressed during Scythian domination. Herodotus was the only ancient author who described the Median attempts to create a centralized country as early as in the 7th century BC.²⁸ His version of the Median history, although general and based mostly on the folk legends, is very similar to the ones found in the Middle-Eastern sources²⁹, which mentioned the attempts to build a unified Median country before Cyaxares.

According to Herodotus (Hdt I 102), the first Median king Deiokes did not conduct an active foreign policy. Phraortes – the second king of Media, was said to conquer some lands in Asia. As the Mesopotamian sources do not mention any Median conquests within the area of Asia Minor or Mesopotamia at the time, these must have been the lands of eastern Iran. The Median control over the territory of eastern Iran could not be very strong and probably was limited only to vassal relations, tightened by marriages with local tribal chieftains, what was a common practice during the rules of successive Median, and later Achaemenid, kings.³⁰ The process of establishing the Median rule on this territory, assuming some kind of Median supremacy over these lands before Cyaxares as suggested by Herodotus, was stopped by Scythians.³¹ However, these relations, although weakened, were not completely severed, as it were the peoples of eastern Iran (mainly Parthians and Hyrcanians) who helped Cyaxares in his fight with Scythians.

Having such a large number of people at his disposal, the Median monarch was able to sustain his offensive against Assyrians for a very long time. With each passing year and each battle, Assyrians were less and less capable of refreshing their army with new reserves. This largely contributed to the Assyrians' fall, as they were unable to deploy new units. Also the wars on Urartu, during the final stages of the Assyrian campaign, appear to have only a minor effect on the Median military potential. This seems to prove the fact that Medes were supported by Eastern-Iranian contingents during the conflict.

After the war on Assyria, Medes became the most powerful nation in the region. Babylonians were well aware of this fact, as from that point they had always been afraid of the Median invasion. They created a line of fortifications near the Median border, called The Median Rampart. However, Medes never attacked Babylonia, as they were more interested in the territories of Asia Minor (Hdt I, 74).³²

The course of war between Assyria and the Babylonian-Median coalition explicitly shows that Media was the most active participant in the fights. Medes had a powerful army and were able to sustain their attacks for a long time; this fact implies that their

²⁷ Frye, 1965, 69; Lanfranchi, 2003, 92; Radner, 2003, 9.

²⁸ Hdt I 95-101.

²⁹ Lanfranchi, 2003, 92; Radner, 2003, 9; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006.

³⁰ Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006.

³¹ Hdt I 104.

³² Diakonow, 1961, 56-57; Frye, 1965, 73; Collins, 1974, 20; Diakonov, 1985, 126; Frye, 1988, 82;; Diakonoff, Cyaxares; Rollinger, 2003, 316; Liverani, 2003, 7-8; Rollinger, 2003, 305-310; Dandamayev, Medvedskaya, 2006.

state had a centralized ruling system. Cyaxares appears to have been an ambitious and influential politician, capable of carrying out bold and long-term plans. There is no doubt that Medes were the most important part of the alliance. Unfortunately, Babylonians diminished the role of their allies and in the chronicles presented their own point of view regarding the conflict and the resulting fall of Assyria.

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